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Introduction To The Old Religion

Lesson 3

Anon

1. Development Of The Mystery Religions
    1. Introduction
        1. The development of agriculture had a profound and far reaching effect upon the spiritual development of humanity.
            1. No longer content to worship the Goddess of the Wild Things and the Lord of the Hunt, early mankind sought to interpret their deities in the physical surroundings of the places where they settled to grow their crops.
                1. Volcanic mountains, such as those surrounding ancient Persia, gave rise to Fire Gods whose priests evolved a cosmology which postulated a universe based upon a struggle between good and evil.
                    1. A Fire Priest named Zoroaster would eventually lay the foundation for Zoroasterianism, which would lead to Mithraicism, which would greatly influence religious thinking of the early Christian church.
                    2. Even today, the spiritual center of the Japanese people is the volcanic mountain Fujiyama.
                    3. And the major deity of the Hawaiian people is the volcano Goddess Pele.
                2. Natural opening into the earth were seen as gateways into the domain of the deities and shrines were built around them.
                    1. The most famous of these openings was the shrine at Delphi where, through a succession of goddesses and gods who served as patrons, the priestesses received visions of the future for a fee paid to the temple.
                    2. There is some conjecture that the visions were brought about by inhaling the gases rising from the chasm, over which the priestesses were suspended on a tripod seat.

3. In the British Isles, prominent hills or Tors, such as Glastonbury Tor in Somerset, and the Welsh mountains in Snowdonia, became the focus for local rites.
    1. In Ireland, each river was believed to have its own Goddess, was well as the Goddesses which hold sway on dry land.
2. The one common thread running through all of this was that while the people were becoming urbanized, they still felt a need to identify with the countryside around them and religious rites evolved around some natural power spot so that anyone wishing to partake of the religious experience of these rites had to make a pilgrimage to that religious shrine and be initiated into those rites by the local priestesses or priests.
3. As the cities grew up it became necessary to spread out into the countryside and the shrines were sometimes enclosed in temple building and sometimes opened 'branch offices' on the other side of the city, or in neighboring cities, for the people who could not or would not make the pilgrimages.
    1. This led to the establishment of temples, for public worship and offering, in all the cities of the ancient world.
        1. Usually, these temples were dedicated to the local Goddess or God, that the people of the city worshipped as their personal deity.
            1. An example would be Athens, which was named for its patroness Pallas Athena, who is the Greek Goddess of Wisdom and Beauty.
        2. Not surprisingly, these deities were sometimes tribal deities, which were urbanized as the city grew in size.
            1. And the rites that grew up around the temple were seasonal rites performed to insure the common well-being of the city as a whole.
                1. Religious rites for personal spiritual development was a foreign concept to all but a very few members of the priest/esshood who were responsible for seeing after the well being of their followers.
2. Once the concept of ownership of land for growing food gained a foothold, the need to defend the land from 'outsiders' became a primary concern.
    1. This led to the development of standing armies and navies whose purpose, while initially defensive, soon became offensive.
        1. Time and again, the justification for attacking their neighbors was wrapped in religious robes and it became a matter of one city's Goddess/God supplanting the other in the conquered city.
            1. Usually this did not create too much of an upheaval for the common citizen because the attacker was usually a nearby neighbor and through long years of trade with each other, they were familiar with one anothers rites and beliefs.
            2. Most people saw it as a problem only for the priesthoods, who lost control of the temple monies to the conquering priesthood.
                1. Sometimes it was seen as an improvement for the city could only benefit from having a more powerful God/dess ruling over it and as long as the priesthood kept up the seasonal rituals to insure prosperity the common citizen was not too worried about who was ruling the city.
3. The founding of the Mystery Religions can be tentatively dated back to 331 BCE, when Alexander of Macedonia completed his conquest of the world around the Mediterranean and the Near East.
    1. To give some perspective on how this brought about such a drastic change in the world order we need to look at astronomy and see if we can discern a pattern that repeats itself.
        1. Ancient humanity used astronomy and astrology to guide their lives.

1. The zodiac was seen as a measurement system which allowed humankind to divide the solar year up into 12 equal parts, although some believe that the original zodiac had only 10 signs.
2. The sign of Virgo-Scorpio was broken into two parts by inserting Libra (the Balance) in between them. This created eleven signs plus Libra, establishing the 'balance' at the point of equilibrium between the ascending northern and descending southern signs.
3. Each year the sun passes entirely around the zodiac and return to the point from which it started, the vernal equinox, and each year it falls just a little short of making the complete circle of the heavens in the allotted space of time.
    1. As a result, it crosses the equator just a little behind the spot in the zodiacal sign where it crosses the previous year.
        1. Each sign of the zodiac consists of 30 degrees, and as the sun loses about one degree every 72 years, it regresses through one entire constellation or sign in approximately 2,160 years, and through the entire zodiac in about 25,920 years.

2. Among the ancients, the sun was always symbolized by the figure and nature of the constellation through which it passed at the vernal equinox.
    1. For nearly the past 2,000 years the sun has crossed the equator at the vernal equinox in the constellation of Pisces (the two fishes).
        1. Christianity developed about the beginning of the Piscean Age and the fish was an early symbol for them.
            1. Christianity was only one of two new religions that were based, in part, on the teachings of Judaism.
        2. About 630 years after the founding of Christianity, Mohammed founded the religion of Islam, and his followers are known as Muslims or Moslems.
    2. For the 2,160 years prior to then, it had crossed through the constellation of Aries (the ram).
        1. Just as the Age of Aries began, a new religion developed which would prove to be one of the most enduring Monotheistic religions on Earth.
            1. Judaism was founded by Abraham of Chaldea, who made an agreement with Jehovah that he and his offspring would spread the doctrine that there was only one God.
            2. In return Jehovah promised Abraham the land of Canaan (Israel) for his descendants. The only problem is that the Jews and the Arabs both trace their beginnings back to sons of Abraham, and now both claim Israel as offspring of Abraham.
        2. About 600 years later Hinduism developed in India.
            1. From 600-300 years before the Age of Aries gave way to the Age of Pisces, Buddhism, Taoism, Confuscianism, Zoroastrianism and Mithraicism developed.
    3. Prior to the Age of Aries, the vernal equinox was is the sign of Taurus (the bull).
        1. In ancient Egypt, it was during this period that the Bull, Apis, was sacred to the Sun God.
            1. And the Winged Bull was the spiritual symbol of the Assyrians back when they had city-states dedicated to Goddesses.

2. How interesting - that just as humanity was discovering agriculture during the Age of Taurus, the bull was domesticated so that it could pull a plow.
4. We are about to enter a new age. The Age of Aquarius which promises to turn the world upside down.

2. Getting back to gaining a perspective on how Alexander the Great changed the world order, we need to understand that there is a pattern where the world order changes about every 2,000 years -militarily, economically and religiously.
    1. At any given time through history one or two of these conditions may change, but it is rare that all three change around the same time. When they do people live in what the chinese philosophers called 'interesting times'.
3. The 400 years preceding the Age of Pisces can be compared with the same period of our time, which is bringing in the Age of Aquarius.
    1. About 331 BCE an upstart military leader named Alexander of Macedonia led an army into the very depth of what was then known as the Persian Empire after defeating the troops of Persia who were trying to maintain control of Greek cities in Asia Minor.
        1. Once he had effectively wrested control of the empire from the Persians, he proceeded to take the best of what the empire and his native land had to offer and he created a new world order by which he and his generals divided up the known world and planned to rule.
        2. After Alexander's death the generals ruled as best they could, but they slowly lost control of the great empire until a new military power, Rome, came along and took over.
            1. It is important to keep in mind that the Roman empire did not spring up over night. Under the inspiration and protection of the Macedonian Empire from foreign intervention the Romans were able to defeat the Etruscans who had ruled most of Italy until that time.
                1. It was the peace brought about by the Grecian empire that allowed the Roman republic to last for 200 years and embrace many of the loftier ideals of Greek culture.
    2. In the mid 1700's, a colonel in a rag tag band of irregulars attached to regular troops of the British Empire, started to make a name for himself among the colonists of a British possession.
        1. The British, who were the ruling elite just under 300 years ago, thought of the colonial colonel as an uneducated barbarian and did not take him seriously when the colonials declared their independence and named as their supreme military leader the barbarian from Virginia.
        2. History has recorded how George Washington had his day in the sun when, after defeating the mercenary troops of Britain at Valley Forge, General Cornwallis surrendered to him at Yorktown.
            1. Again the world was turned up side down, and the empire of old was supplanted by a new order, only on a smaller scale.
                1. While it is true that the British Empire did not collapse with the loss of the American Revolutionary War, it marked the beginning of the breaking up of the Empire.
                2. And despite recurring clashes, like the War of 1812, the new country was allowed to grow and develop as a Republic for 200

years until now it is very common to refer to America as the new Rome.

3. Like Alexander before him, Washington and his supporters took the best of what they liked in Britain and combined it with the best thoughts and ideas of the Colonies.
    1. Washington refused to be made the king of America, and they hammered out a new form of government, new laws of commerce, and assurances that the old religious order would not hold sway in the new country.
        1. Not long after the American Revolution, the French Revolution, based on American ideals, rocked Europe with its deliberate shaking off of aristocratic rule.
            1. Even the Russian Revolution was originally a revolt of the people against their aristocracy. It was only after the revolution left a vacuum of leadership that the Communists stepped in and assumed power.
4. If you look around at our capitol, you will see that the architecture is reminiscent of Grecian and Roman Temples, and the principles that our country was founded upon, principles like freedom and democracy, are Grecian Ideals.
    1. This is not a coincidence. The Founding Fathers were scholars of Greece and Rome, for knowledge of the history of these two countries was considered an integral part of a classical education.
        1. It will be interesting to see if America, like Rome, falls into the trap of being forced into becoming an Imperial power in order to support the welfare state at home.
            1. One of my favorite sayings is "A people who refuse to learn from history, are doomed to repeat it."

2. The Social Significance of the Mystery Religions
    1. In order to understand the needs and desires which found satisfaction in mystery religions, it is necessary to take a broad view of the general social situation in the Greco-Roman world.
        1. And to define, if possible, the outstanding religious interests of the Mediterranean people in the 1st century of the Piscean Age.
            1. Greco-Roman society with all of its complexity was, even so, a closely knit social fabric unified in large and significant ways.
                1. Politically, the Mediterranean world of the Augustan Age was a unit for the 1st time in history, welded together by 300 years of military conquests preceding the beginning of our era.
                    1. To hold this Mediterranean world together in an imperial unity, Rome had thrown over it a great network of military highways reaching to the farthest provinces and centering on Rome herself.
                2. Cultural and commercial processes operated even more effectively than military conquests and political organization to unify the peoples of the Mediterranean area.
                    1. Society under the early Empire continued to be as highly Hellenized as it had been during the 300 years previous.
                        1. Greek continued to be the language of culture and commerce, with Latin as the lingua Franca of diplomacy.
                    2. The sea, cleared of pirates, was a great channel of commerce that led to all the Roman world, and the military highways provided the necessary land routes.

1. Because of the easy means of communication, there was a free mingling of races and classes in the centers of population.

3. Free competition on a world scale gave the individuals their opportunities.
    1. Before the days of Alexander, the interests of the individual were quite submerged in comparison with those of the tribe or state.
        1. The larger social group was the end-all of existence and personal concerns were properly subordinated thereto.
        2. But in the changed conditions of the imperial period, all was different.
    2. Individual interests came to the fore and those of the state receded to the background.
        1. The Roman Empire meant far less to the citizen than the Greek polis had meant.
        2. Rome was too large and too far away to be very dependent on each citizens support or to contribute to their happiness.
4. In the ruthlessness of conquest and the stress of competition, local customs were ignored, traditions were swept aside, and the unsupported individuals were thrown back upon their own resources.
    1. Happiness and well-being, if won at all, must be won by the individual, and for the individual alone.

2. Religion, like the other phases of Greco-Roman life, felt the effect of these changed social conditions.
    1. For the masses, the former religious sanctions and guaranties no longer functioned.
        1. In the old, pre-imerial days, the individual was well satisfied with group guaranties that were offered by local and nationalistic religions.
            1. Granted, the relationship to the state deity was only an indirect one - through the group to which they belonged.
            2. Also granted, the goods sought were chiefly social benefits, which were shared with their fellow citizens.
                1. But so long as the God/desses protected the state and the state protected the citizen, they were well content.
        2. Successive conquests by foreign powers, however, rudely destroyed this complacency, and the victory of Macedonian and Roman arms wrecked the prestige of merely local and national deities.
            1. As racial barriers were broken down and the individuals felt free to travel and trade, they became conscious of needs and desires they had never known before.

3. As a practical matter, the time honored customs of an individuals parent and grandparent could not be maintained in foreign lands. New sanctions and assurances of a more personal sort were needed.
    1. In line with the general social movements of the times, there was a distinct breakdown of traditional religion, and national cults, popular in the Hellenic period, fell into disuse.
        1. But the masses of people did not become irreligious by any means, they instead turned to religions of another type and sought satisfactions of a different variety.
            1. Their quest was no longer for a god/dess powerful enough to save the state but rather for one who was benevolent enough to save the individual.
                1. Oracles were consulted, not so often in the interest of the community but more frequently for the guidance of individuals in their personal affairs.

1. More than ever before the home became a temple and the daily life of the family was filled with the trappings of piety.
2. The shrines of the healing gods/esses were overcrowded, and magicians, who were considered the chief mediators of divine power, carried on a thriving business.

4. In particular, people turned for the satisfaction of personal desires to the group of mystery religions, which were very ancient cults that had hitherto been comparatively insignificant.
    1. Most of them came to the Greco-Roman world from the Orient, with the authority of a venerable past, with an air of deep mystery, and with rites that were most impressive.
    2. But the chief reason for their popularity at this time was the satisfactory way in which they ministered to the needs of the individual.
        1. Completely denationalized and liberated from racial prejudices, they could be practiced anywhere within or without the empire.
            1. They no longer depended upon a natural focus such as a cave or spring or mountain, so it was possible to worship anywhere they found themselves.
                1. This allowed popular cults like that of Isis to spread thoughout the Roman empire with little or no resistance
            2. Being genuinely democratic brotherhoods in which rich and poor, slave and master, Greek and barbarian met on a parity, they welcomed men of all races to their membership.

3. What the Mystery Religions had to offer Humanity
    1. A new birth for the individual
        1. When the neophyte was initiated into the cult he became a new man.
            1. In earlier centuries, when the emphasis in religion was tribal or national, this had no special advantage.
                1. Then the individual felt certain of his salvation because of his birth into a particular tribe or race. This still holds true for tribal religions like Judaism, where it is not enough to be a good Jew. All Jews must be good because they are the chosen people and their God will not make good on His promises until the whole tribe meets his requirements.
            2. Men in the Roman world had confidence in neither racial connections nor in the potentiality of human nature.
                1. The first century Roman wanted a salvation that included the immortality of the soul as well as the present welfare of the body.
                2. An essential change of being was felt to be necessary, and the mystery religions guaranteed this by means of the initiatory rites.
        2. The mystery initiation met the basic religious need for individual as opposed to racial guarantees.
            1. Mystical experience was a common denominator of all the Greco-Oriental cults of the mystery type.
                1. The imperial age was a time when religion was turning inward and becoming more emotional, while philosophy, converted to religion, was following the same trend.
                    1. There was a cultivated antagonism between spirit and matter and a conscious endeavor to detach one from the other by means of ascetic practices.
                        1. It was a period of world-weariness and other worldliness.
                    2. There was a demand for fresh emotional experiences, and the culminating effort was to overleap the bounds of nature and to attain

union with the divine in the region of the occult.
        1. These experiences found expression in the popular religions of redemption, in the mysteries of Eleusis and Attis and Isis and the rest.
2. Fulfilling the yearning for the mystical type of religious experience.
    1. Two considerations that have a direct bearing on why the yearning for mystical religious experience arose at this time are:
        1. The thought world of the average person had suddenly enlarged to proportions that were frightening. The horizon of a Syrian trader in Nero's time was vastly more inclusive than that of a few hundred years before. And this new horizon included a far greater number of facts to be classified and accounted for, and a constantly enlarging group of problems and difficulties to be settled. This expanded thought-world of the middle of the 1st century was in a very chaotic state. The social structure of an earlier age had been completely wrecked. Greek democracy and Oriental despotism alike had been crushed by imperial power. National and racial distinctions, once considered very important, had been all but forgotten. Whole classes in society had been wiped out. Old things had passed away and what chiefly impressed the ordinary man about the new order of things imposed by Rome, was not so much its orderliness as its newness. The citizen of the Greek Polis had lived in a friendly town that was his own; but the Roman citizen found himself bewildered in the crowded streets of a strange city that was everyman's world.
        2. The man of the early empire felt that the ultimate control of his disordered universe was not at all in his own hands, but that it rested with supernatural powers on the outside. According to the 1st century point of view, the more important relationships of life were with the controlling powers in the supernatural realm. Whether these powers were friendly or unfriendly or both or neither according to circumstances, there was a great variety of opinion; but generally speaking there was no doubt of their power.
            1. One way the common man had of establishing safe relations with the occult powers was the way of mysticism. He either projected himself emotionally into the supernatural realm and so came into contact with deity, or else by magic and sacrament drew the God down into the human sphere and in this fashion realized the desired alliance. Not until this 'unio mystica' was accomplished did many men feel completely secure in the face of the uncertainties of life. The mystery religions offered this form of salvation through union with the lord of the cult. This alliance with the lord of the cult robbed the unknown spiritual world of its terrors and gave the initiate the assurance of special privilege in relation to the potent beings who controlled the destinies of men. In the background of each of the mysteries hovered the vague form of the supreme power itself. The Anatolian Magna Mater Deum. Or the Ahura Mazda of the Persians. In the foreground, ready for action, stood the mediator who chiefly mad the divine power manifest in life and nature. The youthful Attis, or the invincible Mithra. The mystery Gods and Goddesses were also potent as netherworld divinities. Persephone reigned as queen of the dead and Osiris presided as judge of the souls of the departed. By means of initiation into their cults, the devotee was enabled to share vividly in the experiences of these divinities and even to attain realistic union with them.

2. United with the Gods themselves, the initiate was in touch with currents of supernatural power which not only operated to transform his very being but rendered him immune from evil both in this life and in the next.

3. Providing emotional stimulation through the mystical experience of contact with a sympathetic savior.
    1. The mysticism of the cults was not of the intellec- tualized type but rather of a more realistic, objective, ecstatic and highly emotional variety.
        1. This emotional character of cult mysticism answered directly to an inordinate appetite for emotional stimulation among the masses.
            1. This abnormal craving, directly or indirectly, was due to the terribly depressing experiences through which society had passed during the wars that filled the years immediately preceding the Piscean Age.
                1. For 400 years the wars had been unceasing. The Mediterranean world had known war at its worst, and this long series of conquests, civil wars, proscriptions, and insurrections had produced an untold amount of agony.
                2. All these military operations had entailed terrible suffering for all classes. There was, of course, the killing and maiming of the combatants themselves. Bread- winners had been drafted into service, leaving their families to fend for themselves. Crops over large areas had been destroyed to prevent the enemy from living off the land when the armies retreated. Leaving the local farmers as well as the invading army to starve. Conquered lands had been plunged into debt and bankruptcy, while thousands of men, women, and children, formerly free, had been sold as slaves.
                3. The indirect consequences of these military operations were quite as disastrous for the happiness of large numbers of people as were the direct results. One of the most deplorable effects was the practical destruction of the middle classes, which had been the backbone of the society. This left a bad social cleavage between the wealthy aristocratic class on the one hand, and the masses, including the slaves, on the other. Conditions were such that the upper classes had the opportunity of becoming more wealthy and prosperous, while the proletariat correspondingly became more destitute and wretched. Enormous sums of gold and silver, the accumulated wealth of the east, was disgorged on the empire. This created a demand for more luxuries, raised the standard of living for the rich, and multiplied the miseries of the poor. Throughout the period, the number of slaves was constantly being augmented. This lowered the wages and drove free laborers to the idleness of cities where they were altogether too willing to be enrolled on what we would call welfare. The first lesson new Emperors learned, if they were to keep their crowns, was to feed and entertain this huge number of idle workers so that they would not decide to overthrow the government. This is where the phrase "give them bread and circuses" came from.
                4. With such an unequal distribution of the goods of life, it was inevitable that both extremes in Roman society should feel the need of special emotional uplift and stimulation. The aristocrat felt the need of it because he had pleasures too many. There was a disgust with life,

bred of self-indulgence and brought to birth by satiety. It was the weariness that comes when amusements cloy and the means of diversion seem exhausted. And the poor freeman because he had pleasures too few. There was a genuine sensitiveness to suffering in this age born of a sympathetic understanding of its pain and an earnest attempt to provide alleviation. It was a period when all classes were sensitive to emotional needs, but chiefly the inarticulate masses who were most miserable and knew not how to express their misery.

2. Generally speaking, the officials of the state religion remained unresponsive to this need and the marble Gods of Greece and Rome had no word for men in agony.
    1. Judaism, which had itself gone through a prolonged martyrdom, should have learned from suffering to minister to personal need, but it had not, for its hope was still a national one, not personal.
3. The religions of redemption that came from the east furnished exactly the emotional satisfaction that the age demanded.
    1. They told men of savior-gods that were very human, who had come to earth and toiled and suffered with men, experiencing to an intensified degree the sufferings to which flesh is heir.
        1. These savior-gods had known the agony of parting from loved ones, of persecution, of mutilation, of death itself. In this hard way they had won salvation for their devotees and now they stood ready to help all men who had need.
    2. The rites of these mystery religions were impressively arranged to represent the sufferings and triumphs of the savior-gods.
        1. In this way it was possible for the initiate to feel as his God had felt, and sometimes more realistically, to repeat the archetypal experiences of his lord. His initiation was a time of great uplift, that elevated him above commonplace worries and gave him an exalted sense of security. In after days the memory of that great event remained with him to bouy him up amid the hardships of his daily lot, or in such special crises as might come to him.
4. By means of initiatory rites of great impressiveness, the mystery cults were able to satisfy the desire for realistic guarantees in religion.
    1. The majority of people were not satisfied with a merely emotional assurance that the desired mystical union had taken place.
        1. Something more tangible and objective was required to supplement the evidence furnished by subjective experience.
            1. Both the Greek and Romans conceived of their Gods as being very real and humanistic.
            2. They gave them admirable representation in painting and sculpture and sought to secure their favor by rites that were correspondingly realistic.
                1. At the beginning of the imperial period, when the uncertainties of life made man feel more dependent than ever on supernatural assistance, the operations whereby they strove to assure themselves of the desired aid became, if anything, more realistic than ever. In such an age and amid people who thought in these vivid terms, the rites of religion, in order to satisfy, had to give actual and dramatic representation of the processes they were intended to typify and induce. This was what the ceremonies of the mystery cults did, and this was another reason for the great attractive power of the cults.

1. Most of the rites of the mystery religions had come down in traditional forms from an immemorial antiquity.
    1. Originally performed among primitive people in order to assure the revival of vegetable life in springtime, they were enacted in these later imperial days for the higher purpose of assuring the rebirth of the human spirit.
        1. Yet, among the masses at least, the efficacy of these ceremonials was as little questioned as it had been in their original primitive settings.
    2. The baptismal rite, in particular, whether by water or blood, was regarded as marking the crucial moment in a genuinely regenerative process.
        1. Once reborn the initiates were treated as such, their birthday was celebrated and they were nourished in a manner appropriate for infants.
        2. Childish though those rites may seem, yet they were frought with spiritual significance for the initiate.
    3. The semblance of mystic marriage and the partaking of consecrated foods were other realistic sacraments in which the neophyte found assurance that he was really and vitally united with his lord and endowed with the divine spirit.
        1. What usually gives the modern student pause is the very sincere conviction of pagan initiates that their spiritual transformation was not only symbolic, but was also really accomplished by these dramatic ceremonies.
1. The personal transformation which was the initial feature of cult mysticism had its ethical as well as its religious aspect, thus producing a blend of ethics and religion.
    1. The early imperial period was a time of great moral disorder and confusion, paralleling the stress and strain in other areas of life.
    2. The continuous social upheavals of the Hellenistic and republican times, the free mingling of populations in commerce and conquest, and the enormous increase of slaves furthered the process of cutting thousands of human beings loose from moral restraints.
    3. However, the general trend in society as a whole was not only a period of moral anarchy but of ethical awakening as well.
        1. Interest was alive on moral questions.
            1. Almost every characteristic vice in Roman society was being met with the most vigorous protests and sometimes by active measures to correct them.
        2. There was at this time a particular demand for a greater correctness in ethical teaching.
            1. Teachers of the time studied the writings of philosophers and moralists to find texts and maxims to use with their pupils.
            2. Catalogues were made of virtues and vices and the former were summarized as certain cardinal qualities especially to be desired.
            3. There was a call for living examples, which could be referred to as demonstrations of the practicality of these ideals.
        3. The conditions of life were such that most men did not have confidence in their own unaided ability to achieve character.
            1. They looked to the supernatural realm for the powers that controlled personal conduct as well as the more ultimate destinies of humanity.
                1. What the men of the 1st century wanted was not so much ideals, but the power to realize those ideals; not a code of morals, but supernatural sanctions for morality. In the last analysis, it was divine will, and not human welfare, that was the generally accepted criterion whereby the validity of any ethical system was tested. Accordingly, the

religion which could furnish supernatural guarantees along with its ethical ideals had a preferred claim to 1st century loyalty.

2. The stern morality of Judaism was very attractive. The element that fascinated was not the inherent excellence of Jewish rules for living, but the fact that there were venerable sanctions bearing the impress of divine authority.
    1. The Law of the Jews was quoted as the ipse dixit of Yahweh himself and the scriptures were referred to as authentic documents proving the genuineness of the representation. Such confirmation was impressive to men who were seeking for divine authority to make moral conduct obligatory.
3. The religion of the Egyptian Hermes was one that offered supernatural guarantees for its ethical ideals.
    1. In the process of Hermetic rebirth, the powers of the God drove out hordes of vices and left the regenerated individual divinely empowered for right living.
4. That was Mithraism's point of strength also, and accounted not a little for the vogue it continued to enjoy for some time after the beginning of the Christian Era.
    1. The "commandments" of Mithraism were believed to be divinely accredited. The Magi claimed that Mithra himself revealed them to their order.
    2. One of the chief reasons why the high Mithraic ideals of purity, truth, and righteousness had real attraction, was because Mithra himself was the unconquerable champion of these ideals and the ready helper of men who were willing to join with him in the eternal fight of right against wrong and good against evil. Mithraism was the outstanding example of a mystery religion which gave supernatural sanctions to the demands of plain morality.

4. The mysticism of the mysteries came in effectively at just this point to give both realistic content and divine authorization to the ethic of brotherhood.
    1. The ideals of the group found personification and embodiment in the divine Lord or Lady who was the object of the cult worship.
        1. Osiris was the model righteous man who functioned in the divine state as the judge of the departed. Hence the Isian initiate, reborn as the new Osiris, was supposed to exhibit the Osirian type of righteousness.
    2. So, too, in the other mystery systems, the initiate realistically united with his Lord, and actually transformed by the virtue of the union, had his ideal incorporated within himself as a part of his very being.
        1. In the end, mystical experience became the theoretical basis and practical incitement to good conduct.
        2. In this close articulation of mysticism and morality, the cults made an important and distinctive contribution to the ethical life of the age.

2. The mysteries were unusually well equipped to meet the need for assurances regarding the future.
    1. The ultimate pledge that the mystery religions made pertained not to the present but to the future.
        1. It was the assurance of a happy immortality.

1. Whatever attitude a man might adopt on the continued existence after death, he could not well avoid the issue.
2. The mystery cults from Greece and the Orient specialized in future guarantees.
    1. Originally intended to assure the miracle of reviving vegetation in the springtime, they were perfectly adapted to guarantee the miracle of the spirit's immortality after physical death.
        1. These were the cults which in the form of Dionysian and Orphian brotherhoods had first brought the promise of a happy future life to Greece in the religious revival of the 6th century BCE.
        2. In Hellenistic times the Greek cults merged with similar religions from the east which offered equivalent guarantees, and in this syncretized form came into their own.
    2. In the early imperial period of Rome, they were more popular than ever, for they gave positive and definite answers to the questioning of the common man about the future.
        1. Their answer had the authority of revelation and it included the guarantee of divine aid in the realization of that blessed after-life which they vividly depicted to their devotees.

1. Summary
    1. When consideration is given to the fundamental character of the interests represented by the mystery religions, one can well understand their popularity in the Greco-Roman world.
        1. In an era of individualism, when men were no longer looking to religion for guarantee of a racial or national order, the mystery cults offered the boon of personal transformation through participating in rites of initiation.
        2. At a time when men were seeking a larger life through contact with supernatural powers, the mysteries guaranteed absolute union with the divine beings who controlled the universe.
        3. In an age when men were craving emotional uplift, mystery initiation gave them such encouragement as they could scarcely find elsewhere.
        4. At a period where realism characterized thought in all departments of life, the religions of redemption offered men realistic rites to guarantee the actuality of spiritual processes.
        5. The supernatural sanctions were sought to validate ethical ideals, the mystery cults provided a unique combination of mysticism and morality that was effective.
        6. When, as never before, people were questioning about the future fate of the individual soul, the mysteries, through initiation, gave guarantee of a happy immortality.
    2. At every one of these points the mystery religions of redemption were effectively meeting the needs of large numbers of people in Greco-Roman society.
2. Prominent features of a Mystery Religion
    1. A Mystery Religion was a religion of symbolism
        1. Through the use of myth and allegory, iconic representations, blazing lights and dense darkness, liturgies and sacramental acts, as well as suggestion, the intuitions of the heart of the initiate were quickened until s/he was provoked into a mystical experience.
            1. This experience led to a feeling of regeneration, which was the object of every initiation.
    2. A Mystery Religion was a religion of Redemption.
        1. It professed to remove the estrangement between man and God, to procure forgiveness of sins, and to furnish mediation.
            1. Means of purification and the formulae of access to the God, and acclamations of confidence and victory were part of the apparatus of every Mystery.

3. The Mystery Religions were systems of Gnosis.
    1. The Mysteries brought men into contact with that God "who wishes to be known and is known to his own."
        1. They offered an esoteric equipment by which the initiate might ward off the attacks of demons, thwart the menace of Fate, and after death reach the abodes of the blessed mysteries.
            1. There was something, whether doctrine, symbol, or divine drama, which could not be imparted except by initiation to those duly qualified to receive it, a supernatural revelation which gave the recipient a new outlook on life, the world and the deity, and security that was denied to the uninitiated.
            2. The 'mystery' consisted of an objective presentation of the history of the cult Deity, in his or her struggles, sorrows, and triumphs, repeated subjectively by the initiate in sacramental acts, together with prayers and liturgic formulae.
4. A Mystery Religion was a Sacramental Drama.
    1. The Sacramental Drama appealing primarily to the emotions, aimed at producing psychic and mystic effects. Thus the neophyte experienced the exaltation of a new life.
5. The mysteries were eschatological religions, having to do with the interests and issues of life and death.
    1. For the multitudes, it was the mysteries which illuminated the hereafter.
6. A mystery religion was a personal religion, to which membership was open, not by accident of birth into any particular class, but by a religious rebirth.
7. A mystery religion, as a personal religion, presents another side, which is the necessary compliment of an individualistic religion; that is, it takes on the character of a cosmic religion.
    1. The ancients lived in a world in which the primitive association of man's life with the earth and plant and animal life was axiomatic, in which the Universe itself was a rational living being, in which man by his good deeds might be elevated on the path of the divine.

2. A Brief Overview Of The Major Mystery Religions
    1. Fundamental Force Behind Development
        1. Once, there was no purely 'native' or 'hermetic' tradition; only a universal response by the Firstborn to the Earth-lore and the Star-magic of their shamanic priests.
            1. Later, as the single religious impulse of the Foretime split into separate cults, these two approaches, which we may think of as earthly (or chthonic) and stellar, grew further apart, until the beginnings of the Hermetic traditions were seeded in Egypt and the Hellenic world, while in Europe the Native traditions remained more or less grounded in the magic of the earth.
                1. This is not to say that Greece and Egypt did not have their own native traditions, or that development of religion and magic in the Celtic West was so primitive and slow that it required cross-fertilization with other sources to pull it into subtle realms of experience.
    2. The Major Mystery Religions.
        1. It has often been said the the Egyptian mysteries are the true foundation upon which the Western Hermetic systems are built.
            1. This is due in part to the early identification of the Egyptian God Thoth, scribe and guardian of mysteries, with Hermes Trimegistos, the supposed founder of Western occult practice.
                1. Egypt had many mysteries, none more important that those of Isis.
                    1. Her name is said to mean 'throne', 'wisdom', or 'savior', though she possessed many other titles which testify to the universality of her cult.

2. The deepest mysteries of Isis, and her consort- brother Osiris, the God of the Sun, revolve around his death at the hands of his brother Set, who cut Osiris' body into 14 parts and scattered them through the world.
    1. Isis undertook a terrible journey, suffering great hardship, seeking out the broken body of her lord and reassembling the parts.
        1. She found and reassembled all but one part, the phallus, which was thrown into the Nile and consumed by a fish.
2. Despite this, such was the creative power of Isis that she was able to conceive by means of an artificial phallus, and bore the child Horus who avenged his father by killing Set.
    1. This is an archetypical mystery-telling, introducing themes found later in the teachings of the Hellenistic schools and in the work of modern esoteric orders.
        1. It prefigures the death and rising of many gods and show forth the power of the Creative Principle.
        2. It also establishes Isis as Queen of Heaven, more powerful in the eyes of many than even the great god Ra himself, whose representative upon earth was the Pharaoh.

1. In Mithraism, which descended from the Persian Mysteries, Mithra stands as a mediator between light and dark, a position adopted by his followers.
    1. In humanity, the battle for the soul is fought out in the territory of the flesh. Mithra, entering there, keeps all in balance.
        1. Mithraism was the Freemasonry of the Roman world.
            1. Like the other cults of Oriental origin, it moved with the vast commerce in human beings that was such a notable feature of the ancient world.
            2. The cult of Mithra is one that traveled well, from Syria to Scotland.
            3. The Mithraic community was all men: women gravitated to the parallel cult of Cybele or the exclusively female one of Bona Dea.
            4. The congregations were small; no surviving Mithraeum could house more than a hundred, but of course bigger lodges may have formed, and dissolved, at army camps, because Mithraism was extremely popular among the Roman Legions.
            5. There were no social barriers, so that slaves and privates could become high initiates. The ceremonies were solemnly enacted and the initiations were quite awe-inspiring.
    2. Mithra was born on the 25th of December, called the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun."
        1. This date was not taken over by the Christians for the birth of their Savior until the 4th century BCE.
    3. Some said that Mithra sprang from the union of sun god and his own mother.
        1. Some claimed his mother to be a mortal virgin.
            1. Others said Mithra had no mother, but was miraculously born of a female Rock, the petra genetrix, fertilized by the Heavenly Father's phallic lightning.
2. In the many histories of the ancient world, only one figure is described as being of greater importance than Hermes. This is the Persian mage Zoroaster, who may actually have lived around 1000 BCE., or even earlier, but who clearly did not predate the foundation of the Egyptian mysteries from which he drew heavily for his own system.
    1. It is from the Persian mysteries that we derive the dualistic spectre which has haunted esoteric philosophy and teaching ever since.
        1. In the Zoroastrian pantheon these opposing forces are Ormuzd and Ahriman, who derive ultimately from Ahura Mazda, the divine principle.

1. Known as the Holy Immortals, or Amesha Spentas, they correspond to the levels of creation, clearly foreshadowing the teaching of later mystery schools such as those of Orpheus and Mithra.
2. Against the Spentas are arrayed the Devas, the companions of the Evil One, who are seen as ruling over the earth.
    1. The position of Persian dualism is confused by a Zoroastrian heresy called Zurvanism, which is often mistaken for mainstream Zoroastrianism.
        1. In Zoroastrianism proper, Ahura Mazda is supremely god: his Spentas are not on the same footing.
        2. In Zurvanism, however, Ahura Mazda is made into a lesser creator or demiurge, hence the cosmic struggle of good against evil which takes place in the world of matter.
2. In Zoroastrian teaching, a savior or saoshyant was to be born, who would combat evil and bring the struggle to an end once and for all, thus betokening the Frasokereti, the making perfect at the end of time.
    1. In this we see an echo of the Egyptian mysteries, and a prefiguring of the gnostic position, as well as the appearance of a third figure which becomes a requirement of all dualistic thinking sooner or later. This third figure who will balance out the struggle is a Messiah.
    2. Mithra's birth was witnessed by shepherd and Magi, who brought gifts to his sacred birth-cave of the Rock.
2. Mithra performed the usual assortment of miracles - raising the dead, healing the sick, making the blind to see and the lame to walk, casting out devils.
    1. As a 'Peter', son of petra, he carried the keys of the kingdom of heaven.
3. His triumph and ascension to heaven were celebrated at the spring equinox, when the sun rises toward its apogee.
    1. Before returning to heaven, Mithra celebrated a Last Supper with his 12 disciples, who represented the signs of the zodiac.
        1. In memory of this, his worshippers partook of a sacramental bread marked with a cross.
            1. This was one of the seven Mithraic sacraments. It was called mizd, in latin-missa, in english- mass.
    2. Mithra's image was buried in a rock tomb, the same sacred cave that represented his Mothers' womb.
        1. His image was later withdrawn from the cave and was said to live again.
4. What began in water would end in fire, according to Mithraic beliefs.
    1. The great battle between the forces of light and darkness in the Last Days would destroy the earth with its upheavals and burnings.
        1. Virtuous ones who followed the teachings of the Mithraic priesthood would join the spirits of light and be saved.
        2. Sinful ones who followed other teachings would be cast into hell with Ahriman and the fallen angels.
5. Mithra's cave-temple on the Vatican Hill was seized by the Christians in 376 CE.
    1. Christian Bishops of Rome pre-empted the Mithraic high priest's title of Pater Patrum, which became Papa, or Pope.

1. While the Mithraic mysteries succeeded those of Zoroaster, they followed those of Dionysus, through which the core of Hellenic mystery teaching found its way into the Western Mystery Tradition.

1. Two streams of consciousness are discerable within the Classical mysteries, which might be called Dionysian and Apollonian.
    1. The Apollonian mysteries related to reason, to the heavens and to order; this is in contradistinction to the chaotic mysteries of Dionysus.
        1. The priests of Apollo were more interested in wresting the political power away from the earlier Goddess worshipping peoples who held sway as the Oracle at Delphi, and so their mysteries were not so widely spread because they were tied to a specific location and shrine.
    2. The Mysteries of Dionysus were those of the sacrificial king: they pertain to the underworld side of things, the chthonic and ecstatic cult of maenads and bacchantes.
        1. Of all the mystery Gods, it is Dionysus whose character has become most firmly fixed in the collective imagination. His worship spells orgies and drunkenness; he personifies the irrational and uncontrolable urges of mankind and beasts; he drives to frenzy the maenads and the poets.
            1. The myth of Dionysus' origins tells that he was first born from the union of Zeus with Persephone.
                1. Zeus designated this 'Zagreus' as his heir, but the jealous Titans lured him away while he was yet a child, killed, dismembered him and devoured all the pieces except for the heart, which Athena rescued and preserved.
                2. Zeus, in anger, reduced the Titans to ashes, from which the new race of humanity was fashioned. Thus each person contains a fragment of Dionysus within their 'Titanic' earthly body.
                3. From the heart of the god was brewed a love-potion, which was given to Semele, a mortal, who then forced her lover -Zeus again- into revealing himself to her in his primal form. This unveiling was so overwhelming as to annihilate her, but the child she was carrying was saved by Zeus enclosing it in his loins until the time came for its birth as the second Dionysus.
            2. The young god grew up in Thrace, suckled by goats and raised by satyrs and sileni. When he reached maturity, he descended through the Alcyonian Lake to rescue the shade of his mother Semele from Hades and then raised her to Olympus.
                1. Afterward, accompanied by a motley train of semi-human beings, maenads and panthers, he set off on wanderings throughout the world, from Libya to Arabia to India and thus back to his homeland.
            3. Everywhere he went he brought humanity knowledge of agriculture, arts and crafts, and most especially the cultivation of the vine and wine-making.
                1. On the Isle of Naxos he discovered the Cretan Princess Ariadne, abandoned there by Theseus, and joined with her as her husband. Together they ascended to the heavens, whence he offers a similar blissful reward to his devotees, temporarily in this life and permanently after death.
2. There had been an initiatic institution in Greece at Eleusis at least since the 8th century BCE, with both Greater and Lesser Mysteries.

1. The function of all lesser mysteries, and equally of the lower grades of initiation was to impart information on the nature of higher worlds.
    1. The Eleusinian symbolism of corn, pomegranites and poppies refers to the unseen forces which affect humanity via the vegetable kingdom, building the body and informing the mind.
        1. The intuitive grasp of this relationship, in all its wonder and complexity, was summarized in the famous climax od the Mystery, so disappointing to non-initiates, the displaying of an ear of wheat.
    2. Certain information was also given at Eleusis by word of mouth, including the 'password to the Paradise of Demeter' to be used after death.
        1. In the Lesser Mysteries of other gods, it is suggested that the fact of heliocentricity was revealed.
            1. Jewish esotericism includes the teaching of reincarnation.
                1. So Lesser Mysteries give the initiates theoretical knowledge which changes their whole view of humanity and the cosmos, and stands them in better stead when they have to leave this world for the unknown.
2. The Mysteries of Demeter were celebrated every five years at Eleusis.
    1. The candidate of the Lesser Mysteries underwent a symbolic journey in which the quest of Demeter for her lost daughter Persephone in Hades was reenacted with the would-be candidate in the role of Demeter.
        1. The journey within was that of the darkened soul: the candidate passed through a door into total darkness: if they survived the experiences met within they passed through a second door into brilliant light - symbolizing rebirth into the heavenly sphere. Here they actually meet the gods, experiencing Demeter's journey as their own recovery of lost enlightenment.
3. The function of the Greater Mysteries of Eleusis was to bring about direct contact with the beings who inhabit the higher worlds.
    1. The higher grades of initiation were conducted individually rather than collectively as in the Lesser Mysteries.
        1. The Initiation of Isis were given to those selected by the Goddess through having had significant dreams, whether they were laity, priests or priestesses.
        2. In the inner truth of the Eleusinian mysteries, the birth of the soul into matter is seen as death; only through participation in the mysteries can the initiate rise to a timeless reality where he is utterly free and alive.
            1. The soul sleeps in the body for most of the time, awakening only when it has been transformed by ritual and the use of an initiatory drink.
                1. To die without this experience is to sleep forever or to wander houseless in the caverns of Hades.
    2. The primary objective in these initiations was to take the candidate through the gates of death.
        1. As in shamanic, Masonic, and other later initiations, the candidate was placed in a trance, the consciousness taken out of the body, and in this state to experience higher states of being and meet some of the denizens of the invisible worlds.
            1. Through direct experience the candidates would learn that they could live freely without their physical bodies, and that the gods they worshipped were perfectly real.

1. Then they would return to earth fully convinced of their own immortality and prepared to meet death fearlessly, knowing it is the gate to freedom and the soul's true home.

3. As a descendant of Dionysus, Orpheus is the intellectual image of a demi-god, raised to deity by his sufferings in the underworld: a perfect symbol for all who follow the paths of the mysteries.
    1. The movement from the cult of Dionysus and Apollo to Orphism, marks a change from a more primitive religious response towards an ethically-based philosophy and mysticism which included belief in the transmigration of souls, reincarnation and the final assumption into godhead.
        1. Orpheus has the lyre and the gift of music from Apollo, yet ends like Dionysus, torn apart by Thracian bacchantes.
            1. The shamanic practices of the Native Tradition overlapping the priestly function of the mystery school.
                1. The suffering of Orpheus, who loses Euridice (through fear, the first pitfall of all mystery knowledge) and is then dismembered by the Maenads, is a paradigm of the suffering and rebirth of the sleeping soul.
    2. The Orphic mysteries are complex in the extreme.
        1. The most important aspect of the Orphic Mysteries was that humanity and the gods are related.
            1. At a most subtle and sensitive level a blurring of the edges occurs, an overlapping of human consciousness and divine awareness.
                1. "Everything that lives is Holy" becomes a reality in the interaction of the divine and the mundane.
        2. The hierarchy of spiritual creation is supremely complex, but the gods are like a ladder, a system of related possibilities, the potentiality of which is seeded within the whole of creation.
            1. We are all related, not just in a familial sense but also to everything else: earth and water, sky and stone; not only because all of creation is made up of different combinations of molecules, but because we are all a part of the divine hierarchy.
                1. This is the true meaning of the mystery teaching concerning the divine spark; the god like potential of humanity is far better expressed by this means.
                    1. The divine fragment is that part of us which is always seeking reunion, a reassembly of separated parts into the whole from which they were created; a return to the paradisial state.
        3. The Orphic school was, above all, syncretic.
            1. Orpheus is credited with the dissemination of the mysteries, with passing on rather than inventing much that became the basis of subsequent Greco-Roman theosophy.
                1. Pythagoras followed many of the Orphic teachings and made Orpheus the central deity of his own esoteric system, establishing a canon of Orphic Hyms.
            2. Between the Orphic mysteries and their partial revival in the Rennaisance, there is a long gap not only in time but in understanding.

3. Christianity Viewed As A Mystery Religion
    1. The Foundation of Christianity

1. Most people think of Christianity as if it were a single specific thing, a coherent, homogeneous, and unified entity.
    1. Christianity is nothing of the sort.
        1. There are numerous forms of Christianity
            1. Roman Catholic
            2. Russian Orthodox
            3. Greek Orthodox
            4. Church of England (Anglican), formed by King Henry the VIII
            5. Various other forms of Protestantism
                1. From the original Lutheranism and Calvinism of the 16th century to such relatively recent developments as Unitarianism.
            6. There are multitudinous "fringe" or "evangelical" congregations.
                1. Such as the Seventh Day Adventists, the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Assembly of God.
            7. And there are assorted contemporary sects and cults.
                1. Like the Children of God and the Unification Church of Reverend Moon.
    2. If one surveys this bewildering spectrum of beliefs - from the rigidly dogmatic and conservative to the radical and ecstatic- it is difficult to determine what exactly constitutes Christianity.
2. If there is a single factor that does permit one to speak of Christianity, a single factor that does link the otherwise diverse and divergent Christian creeds, it is the New Testament and more particularly the unique status ascribed by the New Testament to Jesus, his Crucifixion and Resurrection.
    1. Even if one does not subscribe to the literal or historical truth of those events, acceptance of their symbolic significance generally suffices for one to be considered a christian.
3. If there is any unity then, in the diffuse phenomenon called Christianity, it resides in the New Testament - and more specifically, in the accounts of Jesus known as the four Gospels.
    1. These accounts are popularly regarded as the most authoritative on record.
        1. And for many Christians they are assumed to be both coherent and unimpeachable.
    2. From childhood one is led to believe that the story of Jesus, as it is preserved in the Four Gospels, is if not God-inspired, at least definitive.
        1. The Four Evangelists, supposed authors of the Gospels, are deemed to be unimpeachable witnesses who consistantly reinforce and confirm each other's testimony.
    3. Of the people who today call themselves Christians, relatively few are aware of the fact that the four Gospels not only contradict each other in more than one way, but at times they violently disagree.
2. The Origin and Birth of Jesus
    1. So far as popular tradition is concerned, the origin and birth of Jesus are well enough known.
        1. In reality, the Gospels, on which that tradition is based, are considerably more vague on the matter.
            1. Only two of the Gospels - Matthew and Luke - say anything at all about Jesus' origins and birth; and they are flagrantly at odds with each other.
                1. According to Matthew, Jesus was an aristocrat, if not a rightful and legitimate king - descended from David via Solomon.
                2. According to Luke, on the other hand, Jesus' family, though descended from the house of David, was of somewhat less exalted stock.
                3. And it is on the basis of Mark's account that the legend of the "poor carpenter" came into being.

2. In short, the two genealogies are so strikingly discordant that they might well be referring to quite different individuals.

2. The discrepencies between the Gospels are not confined to the question of Jesus' ancestry and genealogy.
    1. According to Luke, Jesus, on his birth, was visited by shepherds.
        1. But according to Matthew, he was visited by kings, the Magi.
    2. According to Luke, Jesus' family lived in Nazareth.
        1. From here they are said to have journeyed, for a census (that history suggests never in fact occurred) to Bethlehem, where Jesus was born in the poverty of a manger.
    3. But according to Matthew, his family had been fairly well to do residents of Bethlehem all along, and Jesus himself was born in a house.
        1. In Matthew's version Herod's persecution of the innocents prompts the family to flee into Egypt, and only on their return do they make their home in Nazareth.
3. The information in each of these accounts is quite specific and - assuming the census did occur - perfectly plausible.
    1. And yet, the information itself simply does not agree. The contradiction cannot be rationalized.
        1. There is no possible means whereby the two conflicting narratives can both be correct, and there is no means whereby they can be reconciled.
            1. Whether one cares to admit it or not, the fact must be recognized that one or both of the Gospels are wrong.
                1. In the face of so glaring and inevitable a conclusion, the Gospels cannot be regarded as unimpunable.
                    1. How can they be unimpunable- when they are inconsistent with each other?
4. The more one studies the Gospels, the more the contradictions between them become apparent.
    1. They can not even agree on which day the Crucifixion took place.
        1. According to John, the Crucifixion occurred on the day before the Passover.
            1. Whereas, Mark, Luke, and Matthew insist that it occurred on the day after.
    2. Nor are the Gospels in accord on the personality and character of Jesus.
        1. Each depicts a figure who is patently at odds with the figure depicted by the others.
            1. A meek, lamblike Savior in Luke.
            2. A powerful and majestic sovereign in Matthew who comes "not to bring peace but a sword."
    3. There is further disagreement about Jesus' last words on the cross.
        1. In Matthew and Mark the words are, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?"
        2. In Luke, the words are-"Father, into they hands I commend my spirit."
        3. And in John they are simply "It is finished."
5. With these discrepancies, they can only be accepted as highly questionable, and certainly not as definitive.
    1. They do not represent the perfect word of ANY God; or if they do, God's words have been VERY liberally edited, censored, revised, glossed and rewritten by human hands.

3. Jesus and the Essenes
    1. As we have seen, the Judaic religion was still a tribal religion offering little chance for individual salvation during a time when people were looking for some assurance that they mattered beyond which tribe, or city or province they came from.
        1. Mystery religions were well established in the east and making inroads into Rome herself.
            1. In addition to the Pharisees and Sadducees who were vying for control of Jerusalem at the time of Jesus' life, there was a sect of ascetics known as the

Essenes.

1. It has been said that the Essenes were the founders of a Mystery religion based along the lines of the sun worshipping Persian anchorites, who in turn evolved their system from Jain yogis professing to work miracles by living apart from the world and practicing extreme self denial.
    1. From historians and chroniclers writing at the time, it is known that the Essenes maintained communities throughout the Holy Land.
        1. A large colony of Essenes occupied the Qumran community from 110 BCE to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE, with a significant period of vacancy during the reign of Herod, 31 BCE - 4 CE.

2. Jesus, John the Baptist, and Simon Magus are said to have been trained in Essenic communities.
    1. Jesus' parents, Joseph and Mary, are also said to belong to the Essenic movement and Jesus may have received his rabbinical training in their schools.
        1. John the Baptist is thought by some to have been an 'advance man' to prepare the way for Jesus to fulfill the old prophecies of being the Messiah.
            1. But there is abundant evidence that Jesus not only knew what the prophecies were concerning the Messiah, but went to great lengths to plan for and carry out the prophecies.
3. The Essenic hierarchy included a chief priest called the Christos (Annointed One), "head of the entire Congre- gation of Israel."
    1. There were ordinary priests called the "sons of Aaron", and another functionary known as the Messiah of Israel.
        1. The Messiah of Israel was also called Teacher of Righteousness.
            1. He suffered physical abuse in atonement for the sins of the entire community, enduring "vindictive sentences of scourging and the terrors of painful sicknesses, and vengeance on his fleshly body."

4. A Radical View
    1. The following is a scenario of what the historical Jesus might have been all about based on looking at the Gospels without the trappings added after Christianity was transported to Rome and changed to bring it into alignment with competing religions.
    EDITORS NOTE: THESE ARE CONJECTURE BY THE AUTHOR, NOT A STATEMENT OF KNOWN FACT BUT BASED ON THE FACTS KNOWN AND THE HISTORY OF THE TIMES AND OTHER RELIGIONS.
        1. Included in this scenario, but of little importance to our discussion, is that Jesus may have been married and have living descendants to this day. Remember that Rabbis had always been allowed to marry.
            1. Jesus was a priest-king, an aristocrat and legitimate claimant to the throne of Palestine, who embarked on an attempt to regain his rightful heritage.
                1. He was believed to be a native of Galilee, which was a traditional hotbed of opposition to the Romans.
            2. He had numerous noble, rich and influential supporters throughout Palestine, including the capital city of Jerusalem.
                1. One of these supporters, a powerful member of the Sanhedrin, may also have been his kin.
            3. In the Jerusalem suburb of Bethany was possibly the home of either his wife or his wife's family; and here on the eve of his triumphal entry into the capital, the aspiring priest-king resided.

1. Here he established the center for his mystery cult.
2. Here he augmented his following by performing ritual initiations, including that of his brother-in-law.
    1. A mystery initiation being the meaning behind the 'miracle' of raising Lazarus from the dead.
4. Such an aspiring priest-king would have generated powerful opposition in certain quarters.
    1. Amongst the Roman administration,
    2. And perhaps amongst the entrenched Judaic interests represented by the Sadducees.
        1. One or both of these interests apparently contrived to thwart his bid for the throne.
            1. But in their attempt to exterminate him they were not as successful as they had hoped to be.
5. The priest-king had friends in high places.
    1. These friends, working in collusion with a corrupt, easily bribed Roman procurator, appear to have engineered a mock crucifixion, on private grounds, and thus inaccessible to all but a select few.
        1. With the general populace kept at a convenient distance, an execution was then staged.
            1. In which a substitute took the priest-king's place on the cross or in which the priest-king did not actually die.
        2. Toward dusk, further impeded visibility, the 'body' was removed to an opportunely adjacent tomb.
            1. From which, a day or two later, it 'miraculously' disappeared.
2. If Jesus was a legitimate claimant to the throne, it is probable that he was supported, at least initially, by a relatively small percentage of the populace.
    1. His immediate family from Galilee, certain members of his own aristocratic social class, and a few strategically placed representatives in Judaea and the capital city of Jerusalem.
        1. Such a following, albeit distinguished, would hardly have been sufficient to ensure the realization of his objectives or the success of his bid for the throne.
            1. In consequence, he would have to recruit a more substantial following from other classes.
                1. Jesus promulgated a message that attempted to do just that.
                    1. A message to offer hope to the downtrodden, the afflicted, the disenfranchised, the oppressed.
            2. It was a message with a promise.
                1. There is no evidence that he promulgated this message with cynicism, for he truly acted as though he took his role as priest to the people of Israel as seriously as he did his role as heir-apparent.
                2. His message was ethical and political.
                    1. It was directed toward a particular segment of the population in accordance with political considerations.
    2. Jesus' message, as it appears in the Gospels, is neither new nor wholly unique.
        1. But if the message, as such, was not entirely original, the means of transmitting it probably was.
            1. Jesus himself was undoubtedly an immensely charismatic individual.
                1. He may well have had an aptitude for healing and other such 'miracles.'

1. He most certainly possessed a gift for communicating his ideas by means of evocative and vivid parables.
2. Which did not require any sophisticated training for his audience, and made them accessible, in some sense, to the populace at large.

3. Moreover, unlike his Essene teachers, Jesus was not obliged to confine himself to forecasting the advent of a Messiah.
    1. He could claim to be that Messiah.
        1. And this, quite naturally, imparted greater authority and credibility to his words.

3. It is clear that by the time of his triumphal entry into Jerusalem, Jesus had recruited a following.
    1. But this following seems to have been composed of two quite distinct elements; whose interests were not precisely the same.
        1. On the one hand, there seemed to be a small nucleus of "initiates" - immediate family, other members of the nobility, wealthy and influential supporters.
            1. Whose primary objective was to see their candidate installed on the throne.
        2. On the other hand, there seems to have been a much larger entourage of 'common people' - the rank and file.
            1. Whose primary objective was to see this message, and the promise it contained, fulfilled.
    2. It is important to recognize the distinction between these two factions.
        1. Their political objective - to establish Jesus on the throne - would have been the same.
            1. But their motivations were very different.

5. Christianity after Jesus
    1. When the bid to put Jesus on the throne of Palestine failed, the uneasy alliance between the two factions fell apart.
        1. The strength of the message that Jesus had used to gain his following had captured the hearts and minds of the followers who were not "insiders" and they fought to keep the hope alive.
            1. Little is said of the followers who backed Jesus in the hopes of garnering power from having helped their friend to the throne but it may well be imagined that they continued to fight for independence from Rome and many may well have perished at Masada.
                1. The first major crisis for the early christians was whether they could afford to be associated with the Jewish peoples, who were becoming increasingly rebellious toward Rome.
                    1. It was clear that Rome would have to take action against the rebels.
                        1. Against this backdrop the early christians needed to decide whether it was necessary to first be a Jew before becoming a christian.
                            1. Saint Paul, always adept at reading the writing on the wall, decided it was not. It was also Paul who decided that the best place to take the new religion was the heart of the empire where there were many oppressed and downtrodden gentiles who, very possibly would be receptive to the message of hope.
    2. The new religion was oriented primarily toward a Roman or Romanized audience.

1. Thus the role of Rome in Jesus' death was of course whitewashed, and guilt was transferred to the Jews.
    1. But this was not the only liberty taken with events to render them palatable to the Roman world.
        1. For the Roman world was accustomed to deifying its rulers, and Caesar had already been officially instated as a god.
            1. In order to compete, Jesus, whom nobody had previously deemed divine, had to be deified as well.
                1. In Paul's hands, he was.
3. Before the message could be successfully disseminated from Palestine to Syria, Asia Minor, Greece, Egypt, Rome and western Europe, the new religion had to be made acceptable to the people of those regions.
    1. And it had to be capable of holding its own against already established creeds.
    2. The new god needed to be comparable in power, majesty, and in his repertoire of miracles, to those he was intending to displace.
        1. If Jesus were to gain a foothold in the Romanized world of his time, he had to become a full-fledged god.
            1. Not a Messiah in the old sense of the term, not a priest-king, but God Incarnate.
                1. Who, like his Syrian, Phoenician, Egyptian, and classical counterparts, passed through the underworld and the harrowing of Hell, and emerged rejuvenated, with the spring.
                    1. It was at this point that the idea of the Resurrection first assumed such critical importance, and for a fairly obvious reason, to place Jesus on a par with Tammuz, Adonis, Attis, Osiris, and all the other dying and resurrected gods who populated both the world and the consciousness of their time.
            1. For precisely this reason the doctrine of the virgin birth was promulgated.
            2. And the Easter festival, the festival of death and resurrection, was made to coincide with the spring rites of other contemporary cults and mystery schools.
4. Given the need to disseminate a god myth, the actual corporeal family of the 'god' and the political and dynastic elements in his history would become superfluous.
    1. Fettered as they were to a specific time and place, they would have detracted from his claim to universality.
        1. Thus, to further the claim of universality all political and dynastic elements were rigorously excised from Jesus' biography.
            1. Also all references to Zealots, for example, and Essenes, were also discreetly removed.
    1. Such references would have been embarrassing.
        1. It would not have appeared seemly for a god to be involved in a political and dynastic conspiracy. Especially one that failed.
5. In the end nothing was left but what was contained in the Gospels.
    1. An account of mythic simplicity, occurring only incidentally in the Roman occupied Palestine of the first century, and primarily in the eternal present of all myth.

End Of Lesson 3

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